

## Testimony Submitted in support of Bill #204

Good afternoon, My name is Jennifer Reid and I am the community coordinator for the BLAST Tick-borne Disease Prevention Program. I join you today in support of Bill # 204, "An Act Concerning Campers' Education." I would like to thank Co-chairs Bartolomeo and Urban and all of the members of the Committee on Children for their interest in ensuring a safe experience for campers in Connecticut. I will specifically address the sections of the bill that focus on education related to tick-borne diseases.

I have coordinated the BLAST program since its creation in 2008 when the town of Ridgefield received a \$50,000 grant from the Department of Public Health to create a Tick-borne disease prevention program for Fairfield County. Working closely with Lyme disease educators, prevention researchers and our health department staff, we developed a program based on the Health Belief Model and the most current prevention research that continues to educate Connecticut citizens at health fairs, schools and community events to this day.

Serving in this capacity has given me the opportunity to travel our state not only speaking about prevention and early symptoms but listening to people's stories. Often these stories involve the plight of children—happy, healthy children who after being bitten by a tick were left suffering with pain, fatigue and cognitive issues long after their recovery should have been complete.

Parents whose children are unable to attend school, participate in sports or socialize with friends due to the effects of a tick bite often tell me they had no idea that Lyme disease could be this serious. They wish they had known more and they wish they had done more to keep their children safe. There is good reason why people who have had Lyme disease take prevention practices more seriously than the general public.

The problem of tick-borne diseases is complex and growing – it's progress sadly mired by medical controversy. But there is one point that I believe all parties agree on – the best possible thing we can do is prevent people from contracting the diseases in the first place. We know that children are at greatest risk, summer is the peak time for infection and the untended,

wooded areas are preferred tick habitat. Summer camp offers the optimal opportunity for children to become infected with a tick-borne disease.

As adults we want our children to experience the beauty of nature on a regular basis. It is essential to a complete childhood. So we must be responsible for teaching them how to enjoy nature and stay safe. To ignore the risks and put blinders on is simply unacceptable. When we know better, we are required to do better. And we know the dangers of tick-borne diseases. We have taught our children about seat belts and bike helmet safety without diminishing their interest in cars or riding a two wheeler. I believe they can learn about protective clothing, appropriate repellent use and tick checks without making them afraid of the woods.

This bill before you today will protect our children's right to safely do what children do best—play outdoors in the summer. Our concern is not only for Connecticut children but for all of the young people who visit our camps from other states and other countries, many of them far less familiar with Lyme disease than our children are. Families should know that they are making a decision that involves the possibility of encountering tick-borne diseases. They should receive appropriate information to help educate their family members and understand how their child will be protected while at camp. Camp staff should have the education and procedural guidelines to ensure the best possible decisions are made for the children in their care. And, I believe the business owners who run camps in our state deserve our support in developing best practice guidelines that, when followed, will help protect them from liability should a child appear to have contracted a tick-borne disease during his or her summer camp experience.

I believe it is time to tell the truth about ticks and the multiple illnesses they carry. The woods are different than they were in my 1950's Connecticut childhood. Tick-borne diseases are a growing public health threat, increasing in incidence and severity. The CDC has called on states, particularly in the Northeast, to take action. We have to face the fact that there is a risk involved now in encouraging children to enjoy nature and teach them how to proceed safely. As informed, responsible community members and concerned legislators, we must take this next step to protect Connecticut's children.